

# Business Standard

## Shyam Saran: A lopsided strategic partnership

**We should be honest enough to acknowledge our strategic partnership with the US may be valuable, but has clearly defined limits**

**Shyam Saran** April 14, 2016 Last Updated at 21:50 IST



US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter has concluded his visit to India on a high note. Most importantly the two sides have agreed to sign a Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement that would enable reciprocal support to each other's armed forces in specific situations such as joint military exercises, interventions in natural disasters and any other situation that may be mutually agreed upon. This does not add up to an alliance relationship but certainly upgrades the defence

relationship between the two countries.

This may open the way for concluding the two other politically more difficult "foundational agreements", viz, the Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which together add up to a level of inter-operability in defence that presupposes a very high level of trust and strategic alignment. While one should welcome the opportunity to access sophisticated defence technologies from the US, such as modern aircraft carrier technology and virtual reality applications, there is need for caution in proceeding with expanded defence cooperation while there continue to be significant differences in perceptions concerning key strategic issues, which impact directly on India's security.

It is in the maritime domain that India and the US appear to have the most significant alignment of interests. This is mainly with respect to the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, including the South China Sea, a region now better known collectively as the Indo-Pacific. The China factor is clearly a shared concern. During Mr Carter's visit, the two sides instituted a regular dialogue on maritime security. This is likely to focus again on the Indo-Pacific. There is no similar alignment of interests with respect to the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf, which would include our concerns over Gwadar and Chinese ingress into our western flank through Pakistan.

China is a security challenge to India not just in the Indo-Pacific but also on the western flank. In fact, China is a greater and more immediate threat to Indian interests on this flank precisely

because it is allied with and supports a hostile Pakistan. It is now becoming active in Afghanistan and the US believes its interests are better served by working together with China and Pakistan to broker peace with the Taliban. Here, India's interests are not aligned with the US. In this regard, the US should not cherry-pick where it wants to work together with India and where it is willing to sideline Indian interests. If that is the case, then we, too, need to be selective in our approach.

We have also seen that the US continues to bracket India and Pakistan together as far as nuclear issues are concerned, ignoring the fact that it is Pakistan which has a first-use doctrine, is deliberately lowering the nuclear threshold by developing and deploying theatre nuclear weapons and rapidly building up its nuclear arsenal. India, by contrast, has a no first-use and retaliation-only doctrine and has been remarkably restrained in developing and upgrading its nuclear deterrent. For President Barack Obama to have suggested recently at the Nuclear Security Summit that both India and Pakistan have nuclear doctrines that are headed in the wrong direction, reflects continued India-Pakistan hyphenation. We should acknowledge that the US has only partially adjusted its posture in this respect.

There is another dimension which works against the forging of a strategic partnership and that pertains to the economic and trade relationship. In this important domain, the two countries are adversaries. The US move to establish the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) without any dialogue or consultation with India is illustrative of how the US Trade Representative looks upon India as a spoiler and a constant irritant, without considering whether there are genuine Indian concerns behind the positions we take. Even on India's membership of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which is not a negotiating body but a forum for sharing best practices, it is the US which is busy warning APEC members that bringing India in would retard progress in the forum. How can India be a strategic and, in particular, maritime security partner in the Indo-Pacific if it is seen as a rank adversary, and treated as such, in the economic and commercial domain in the same region? You cannot be a partner in one domain and a target in another. If that is the case then we should be honest enough to acknowledge that our strategic partnership, which may be of considerable value, nevertheless has clearly defined limits. If the US wishes to keep several options open to pursue its interests, India may need to do the same.

One should acknowledge that India-US relations today are more broad ranging and much deeper than at any time in the past. In the areas of defence and counter-terrorism, the level of cooperation and mutual understanding is unprecedented. But, we should also recognise that there is a constant threat of commercial issues overwhelming the relationship as was the case in 2014-15, when the US pharma industry launched a virtual "beat up on India" campaign on the issue of intellectual property. While India made a major contribution to the success of the Paris Climate Change agreement, at considerable sacrifice of its own long-term energy security interests, the US has dealt a blow to India's renewable energy plans by lodging a complaint at the World Trade Organization (WTO) against India for promoting its domestic solar industry.

Mr Obama recently gave a long interview to *The National Interest* magazine on the evolving global situation and the US's role in the Asia-Pacific region. India did not figure in the interview. So much for the "defining partnership of the 21st century", which is how he had described Indo-US relations during his first visit to India.

The US presidential elections are round the corner and it is anybody's guess what the new administration will look like and what its foreign policy agenda will be. While there will always be issues on which India and the US will adopt different postures, a strategic partnership should entail that on issues of key interest to each other there will at least be a "no surprises" and a "do no harm" understanding. Spelling out these interests may be a good starting point for dialogue with the incoming administration in Washington.

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